A PRESBYTERIAN RESPONSE TO DIVESTMENT
Stephen R. Montgomery
The Commercial Appeal, Saturday, July 19, 2014

Some years ago in Atlanta, I was part of a gathering of Presbyterian ministers that heard a rabbi talk about his faith and what it meant for him to be Jewish. “When we have children,” he said, “one question that parents discuss is ‘When do we tell the children?’”

We thought, of course, that he was referring to the question that virtually all parents wonder about: “When do we tell the children about the facts of life, the birds and the bees?”

How wrong we were. “When do we tell the children that there was a concerted effort to wipe us off the face of the earth? When do we tell them about Auschwitz and Buchenwald?”

I thought about that conversation as the most recent General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), my church family that I love, debated and then approved a motion to divest in three companies doing business with Israel in the West Bank: Motorola, Hewlett-Packard, and Caterpillar. This decision grieves me for reasons I will state below, but before I do it is important to note what it did and what it didn’t do:

- It reaffirmed the right of Israel to exist as a sovereign Jewish nation;
- It rejected the “BDS” movement, Boycott, Divest, Sanctions, and did not support sanctions against Israel or a boycott of Israel products.
- It did not divest from Israel, but rather supported investing in Israel and Palestine.
- It affirmed a two-state solution.

Given that foundation, and given my belief that the ongoing Israeli settlements in the West Bank are barriers to peace, why would I dissent from the decision of the General Assembly to divest from these three companies?

This action is counter-productive to the ongoing peace process. It is morally wrong because it targets Israel alone while ignoring the offenses of other parties in the region. It will undermine the efforts at reconciliation because one, and only one, body in the conflict, Israel, has been targeted as the offender. This never works in efforts of reconciliation and peace. It says nothing about the fact that the goal of Hamas, written into its by-laws, is to destroy Israel.
It says nothing about the threats to Israel’s existence by virtually all of its neighbors, including Syria, Iraq and Iran, especially with the Sunni-Shia extremists wielding their ugly heads at this point in time. It says nothing about the atrocities by and the intransigence of Palestinian terrorists.

Virtually all agree that this is merely a symbolic action. The amount of money involved is a mere pittance compared to the portfolios of these companies. At times symbolic actions are necessary. But this one is not. It is actually harmful. I would argue that it actually encourages Hamas and the enemies of Israel. Symbolic actions make us feel good and even righteous for a while, but our faith is not based upon our feelings, which come and go. Rather, our faith is in the God who created us all, loves us all, and for whom “all things are possible,” including the possibility of justice, security, well-being, and peace for both peoples, Israelis and Palestinians.

To my Jewish friends and colleagues, I pledge to stand with you in efforts toward a just peace with Palestinians and a secure Israel. I am a Christian and a friend of the Jewish people. I am a Christian and a friend to the Palestinian people. I think there is enough justice to go around for both peoples, but only through wisdom and courage; not through statements that demonstrate an ignorance of the whole picture. Consecrated ignorance is still ignorance.

That rabbi in Atlanta concluded his story. “I don’t know exactly when I will tell my children about the Shoah, but when I do, I will tell them about Barmen.” Ah, yes. The Barmen Declaration, which was signed in 1934 by Christians in Germany, primarily from the Lutheran and the Reformed (Presbyterian) Churches, which resisted the emerging Nazism led by the new chancellor, Adolf Hitler. It proclaimed obedience to Christ as God’s one and only Word who determines its order, ministry, and relation to the state. Most signers were executed, exiled, or imprisoned.

We dare not forget. Most of the church was silent then. And so to my Christian…and especially Presbyterian… colleagues and friends, I pledge to obey my ordination vows to work for peace and reconciliation in the world, even though this action by the General Assembly has made this work more difficult. Nevertheless, I make that vow.

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